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SUBJECT: KASPAROV DROPS OUT OF RACE FOR RUSSIAN PRESIDENT

Classified By: POL M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: Garry Kasparov announced December 13 that he will not be a candidate in the March 2 presidential elections. Kasparov made the decision one day after the Central Election Commission (CEC) held firm on its decision that at least 500 members of the United Civil Front (UCF) which Kasparov heads must hold a nominating meeting before they can start collecting the two million signatures necessary for him to get on the ballot. Kasparov's organization was prevented from holding the required nominating meeting of an "initiative group" which means they do not get to advance to the signature collecting stage which ends January 16. On December 13 opposition figure Vladimir Ryzhkov followed suit, leaving former PM Kasyanov and Union of Right Forces (SPS) leader Nemtsov as potential opposition presidential contenders. End Summary.

No Room at the Mir

12. (SBU) The United Civil Front's (UCF) Garry Kasparov told reporters December 13 that he had been forced out of the presidential race when the Kremlin intervened to prevent him from renting a meeting place for the nominating convention that must, by law, be convened in order to nominate him. Kasparov's spokeswoman, Marina Litvinovich, accused the government of pressuring owners of facilities in Moscow large enough to accommodate the necessary 500 people, not to rent to the UCF. Under Russian law, a presidential candidate who is not nominated by a party with seats in the Duma must get the support of at least 500 people at an "initiative group" meeting. Only after this can he/she begin the process of collecting two million signatures necessary to appear on the ballot. The UCF had hoped to hold such a nominating meeting on December 13 at the Mir Theater in Moscow -- and had provided the CEC the required five-day notice on December 8 -- but the owner of the theater backed out of his commitment on December 10, citing "technical reasons."

13. (C) Kasparov told us December 14 that organizers were told by many owners that they had available space to accommodate 500 people, but "not for Kasparov." Kasparov said that the Mir Theater had been the venue for a similar nominating meeting on December 10 and was slated to host another such meeting on December 14. According to Kasparov, the CEC refused his group's request that the CEC be flexible and allow UCF to conduct several meetings totaling 500 in smaller venues that were willing to rent space to UCF. Kasparov told us he would not appeal the CEC's decision, although he is considering taking legal action against the owner of the Mir Theater for breach of contract.

Other Independent Candidates

14. (SBU) Candidates have until December 18 to hold such

nominating meetings. Outgoing independent Duma deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov has declined the nomination of an initiative group that met earlier this week, citing the procedural and financial difficulties facing independent candidates. Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov has accepted the nomination from his People's Democratic Union at its third extraordinary meeting held December 7. Representatives from the All-Russian Civic Congress met on December 12 and approved a procedure proposed by SPS head Boris Nemtsov through which a board of 12 members will select one candidate from the All-Russian Civic Congress.

Party Nominations

15. (SBU) Parties represented in the Duma have until December 23 to hold congresses at which they should nominate their candidates. On December 13, fewer than 200 members of Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (the 500 person requirement does not apply to parties in the Duma) met in Moscow and nominated him for his fourth bid for the presidency. United Russia members will meet on December 17 and are expected to endorse Putin's nomination of First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev as their candidate. The Communist Party is similarly expected to nominate its leader Gennadiy Zyuganov on December 15.

Comment

16. (C) Thus ends the quixotic quest of the former world chess champion to become Russia's next president. It had been clear from the outset that the authorities would not entertain his bid for relevance on the political stage here. Kasparov has not indicated whether he intends to continue his Dissenters' Marches in the face of growing political consolidation around the Putin-blessed candidacy of Medvedev. Despite Kasparov's narrow base, he remains a lightning rod for the Kremlin and a poster boy for the GOR's lack of tolerance for dissent.

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